

Fall 11-26-2012

# Writing Space, Righting Place: Language as a Heterotopic Space in Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative

Lelania Ottoboni Watkins  
*georgia state university*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_theses](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Watkins, Lelania Ottoboni, "Writing Space, Righting Place: Language as a Heterotopic Space in Olaudah Equiano's Interesting Narrative." Thesis, Georgia State University, 2012.  
[https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english\\_theses/143](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/english_theses/143)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of English at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

WRITING SPACE, RIGHTING PLACE: LANGUAGE AS A HETEROTOPIC SPACE IN  
OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*

by

LELANIA OTTOBONI WATKINS

Under the Direction of Dr. Tanya Caldwell

ABSTRACT

Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa may have had abolitionist motivations when writing *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, but the function of the text is much different and self-serving. Specifically, in looking closely at the wording of the text, with its language of we versus they, in group versus out group, ours versus theirs, Equiano clearly feels he at no time belongs fully to any specific group or place; rather, he only partially belongs anywhere, and thus, creates this work of autobiography and appropriation of fiction and oral tradition to negotiate and cultivate his own liminal, or even heterotopic, space. In other words, I suggest he may have used the writing of this text to define his sense of self, creating a space in which he was both in control and fully belonged.

INDEX WORDS: Equiano, Language, Heterotopic, Slave narrative, Autobiography, Life writing, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Eighteenth Century

WRITING SPACE, RIGHTING PLACE: LANGUAGE AS A HETEROTOPIC SPACE IN  
OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*

by

LELANIA OTTOBONI WATKINS

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012

Copyright by  
Lelania Ottoboni Watkins  
2012

WRITING SPACE, RIGHTING PLACE: LANGUAGE AS A HETEROTOPIC SPACE IN  
OLAUDAH EQUIANO'S *INTERESTING NARRATIVE*

by

LELANIA OTTOBONI WATKINS

Committee Chair: Dr. Tanya Caldwell

Committee: Dr. Tanya Caldwell

Dr. Paul Schmidt

Dr. Murray Brown

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2012

## **DEDICATION**

To my grandparents, Grandma Ellen, Grandpa Wayne, Grandma Elvina, and Grandpa Jerry, who each showed me the beauty and value of life, love, and determination, each in their own unique way. I would not be standing here today, looking forward, without you all behind and next to me. To my parents, Elena and Ralph Sawning, whose faith in me and love for me has never wavered. You are my cheerleaders. To my husband, who brings true love, joy, growth, balance, and inspiration to my life daily. You inspire me to be better today than I was yesterday and also encourage me to dream about a better tomorrow.

You have all believed in me when I did not and have celebrated with me when I did. Each of you is a beautiful light in my world for which I am eternally grateful.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I want to acknowledge my director, Dr. Tanya Caldwell, whose enduring patience, guidance, persistence, support, understanding, and encouragement made my completing this thesis possible and real. I would also like to acknowledge my readers, Dr. Paul Schmidt and Dr. Murray Brown, for their insights and efforts. Additionally, I am entirely and eternally grateful to my husband, Sean Watkins, who has been by my side every step of this process, pushing me when necessary, always encouraging me, and who is also now more informed about 18<sup>th</sup> century British literature and Olaudah Equiano than he ever wanted to or imagined he would be.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2 EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE .....</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>3 LETTERS.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>4 CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>42</b>



## 1 INTRODUCTION

*The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, a slave narrative, written by a freed slave, underwent at least nine revisions, and is a pioneer text in the abolition movement of eighteenth-century England. Readers learn, through this work, that Equiano was kidnapped at the age of eleven from West Africa, sold multiple times, bought his freedom, was educated by a boy on a ship, that he barely escaped another kidnap, traveled the world, and ultimately died in England a wealthy and famous father, husband, Christian, abolitionist, and businessman. Unsurprisingly, in the face of this multiplicity, the 250-year old *Interesting Narrative* became embroiled in an academic debate about authenticity. Vincent Carretta, in his, *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (2005) began the controversy by asserting he had found documentation that proves Equiano was actually born in South Carolina, not Africa, and that much of his *Interesting Narrative* is fiction, drawn from other sources, thus invalidating the authenticity of the work. Carretta, does not claim, though, that this documentation invalidates the work's significance. The debate of authenticity within the genre of life writing, which includes, among other forms, biographies, memoirs, slave narratives, and autobiographies, is problematic and distracting as these writings have a complicated relationship with authenticity. Specifically, any life story can only possibly represent pieces or parts of a complete story and, therefore, these creations of lives can never, by definition, be wholly authentic.

Within the genre of life writing, autobiographies and, more specifically, slave narratives are an especially problematic case. These works claim authenticity; yet, they are as subjective constructions, strings of carefully chosen details and works of fiction, an idea central to my

argument. While parts of these narratives may not accurately depict the details of a life, the works do reveal details and circumstances unique to an author, a group, a society, and ultimately an era, significant and relevant to current scholarship, giving voice to a previously voiceless author. More specifically, while portions of slave narratives may be works of fiction, embellished sequences of events, or even interpreted, manipulated truths, the works' content, which tells carefully arranged stories of slaves and freed slaves, is important to current scholarship because they relate details, experiences, and perceptions of an oppressed group,

Biographies and autobiographies, it should be understood, are constructions of lives, artifices of storytelling, that tie together a sequence of events, appearing to tell the story of a cohesive and factual life. The author carefully combs through the life's details, disentangling incidents and embellishing where necessary, so as to tell an effective or persuasive story. Autobiography is, as with any narrative, then, a demonstrative tool. While reliability and "truthfulness" are expected of authors by readers, as they lend truth and reliability to the content and perception of the work, which is a presumed historical record of sorts, these characteristics are not imperative. We as readers must understand that life writing is always a real story woven in to a work of fiction, and result of this merger is a "real" and "authentic" work. In other words, readers want and expect a reliable narrator; however, in autobiographical writing, the narrator cannot be and never is<sup>1</sup>. Looking more closely at slave narratives of this period, too, reveals the

---

<sup>1</sup>An author must necessarily edit their life story or the life story of their subject, omitting and adding details as necessary, to fit within the confines of the covers of a text and for readability, which may lead readers to question the authenticity of the story. For a detailed examination of life writing, authenticity, and reader expectations of a reliable author, see *The Ethics of Life Writing*, edited by Paul John Eakin. This text is a collection of essays in which scholars

questions of audience and voice as issues that are entirely too problematic. Regarding Equiano's *Narrative*, Carretta does not claim this documentation invalidates the work's significance; rather, the birth records raise questions of authenticity and content.

Issues of authenticity have surrounded the text since its publication, with critics such as Benjamin Brawley, Vernon Loggins, and G.I. Jones publicly decrying Equiano as the *Narrative*'s author, asserting him incapable of writing such a work. As Sabino remarks, "Equiano has been characterized variously as a fraud, a plagiarist, an apologist, a hero, a capitalist, and a guerilla fighter" (Sabino 1). As readers look for the facts assumed in an autobiography, an important, if not essential, question is being overlooked. Specifically, what is Equiano's motivation for writing this piece, especially if he knowingly alleges fictional elements and events to be true? Blending historical and personal truths with elements of fiction allows Equiano to deftly craft an identity of his own design, affording a new position of power previously denied. Doing so in his *Narrative*, utilizing the written word, affords Equiano a quiet space of little resistance in which he may project his created self and life, as evidenced by his inconsistent use of names, Olaudah Equiano and Gustavas Vassa, his birth and slave names. Certainly, another answer is that Equiano is telling his story, the story of many voiceless and powerless slaves, attempting to utilize his literacy, wealth, opportunity, and education to elicit change and shine a light on the heinous crime of slave trading.

I assert that an abolitionist agenda may be Equiano's primary motivation and purpose for writing his *Narrative*; however, the function of the text is also intertwined with another agenda,

---

investigate various works of life writing, such as biographies and autobiographies, discussing issues such as ethical reporting and storytelling, authenticity, truthfulness, detail, contradiction, revision of life story, and reader expectations of an author.

forming a complex relationship. Specifically, Equiano clearly feels he at no time belongs fully to any specific group or place; rather, he only partially belongs anywhere, and thus, creates this work of autobiography and appropriation of fiction and oral tradition to negotiate and cultivate his own liminal, or even heterotopic, space, which can be seen when looking closely at the wording within the *Narrative*, with its language of “we” versus “they,” in group versus out group, “ours” versus “theirs.” I suggest he may have used the writing of this text to define his sense of self, creating a space in which he was both in control and fully belonged. This creation of a unique space allows Equiano to speak both from within and without, sharing voices of the oppressed and the oppressors. He simultaneously inhabits both spaces but fully belongs to neither. To achieve his agendas, he must have firsthand experiences with the stories he writes about, the stories of slavery; meanwhile, he must also be accepted on the terms of the white literature audience whose traditions he appropriates.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a prominent scholar who is deeply influential in contemporary race scholarship, notes in his writings, “The Trope of the Talking Book,” and, “Writing, ‘Race,’ and the Difference it Makes,” that black authors used narrative and writing as a means of obtaining recognition in a white-dominated world, an assertion I mostly agree with. Gates positions his ultimate theses atop a foundation of well-executed discussion about language and, more largely, the European canon of literature. He writes, “The slave narratives, taken together, represent the attempt of blacks to *write themselves into being*. What a curious idea: Through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could posit a full and sufficient self, as an act of self-creation through the medium of language” (Gates, “Writing Race” 1897). In other words, black people were not recognized as complete, intelligent people by their oppressors and through the acts of both writing in, and mastering, the language of those

oppressors, they tried to create a self, deserving of all respect and dignity due any person. Equiano, presumably, had to prove his merit and worth, justifying his authorship and literacy, just as almost other black writers had to do, typically in the form of a slave narrative. Gates elaborates by noting, “Writing as the visible sign of Reason; at least since the Renaissance in Europe, had been consistently invoked in Western aesthetic theory in the discussion of the enslavement and status of the black” (Gates, “Writing Race” 1897). Gates adds, “Writing, especially after the printing press became so widespread, was taken to be the *visible* sign of reason. Blacks were 'reasonable,' and hence 'men,' if—and only if—they demonstrated mastery of the 'arts and sciences,' the eighteenth century's formula for writing” (Gates, “Writing Race” 1896). In many places teaching a black person to read and write was illegal, thus making the learning of this skill completely unavailable. A system of oppression, then, was reinforced by barring a group from participating in a language thrust upon them, thus rendering the oppressors justified in continued and further subordination of blacks.

Additionally, Gates offers a brilliant discussion about the trope of the talking book, present in several eighteenth-century slave narratives, in which a book fails to speak to a slave as it does to the master, driving an even larger wedge of language between oppressor and oppressed. The failure of the book's speaking highlights, according to Gates, the absence of the slave in that it denies any voice whatsoever and, subsequently, reason. Ultimately, black authors, in writing autobiographies, were signifying through Western culture, as well, “as the figure of the chain itself,” and, “tried to write themselves out of slavery” (Gates, “Writing Race” 1901). Finally, Gates says of Equiano:

Through the act of writing alone, Equiano announces and preserves his newly found status as a subject. It is he who is the master of his text, a text that speaks volumes of

experience and subjectivity. If once he too was an object, like a watch, a portrait, or a book, now he has endowed himself with his master's culture's ultimate sign of subjectivity, the presence of a voice which is the signal feature of a face. (Gates, "Talking Book" 367)

I find each of Gates' points well articulated and convincing; however, in his discussion of Olaudah Equiano's *Narrative*, in which he suggests Equiano wrote himself into being, I offer another explanation. Rather than arguing that the self behind the *Interesting Narrative* wrote himself into being through mastery of language, I posit he created a space in which he fit, a heterotopic space, a space created through language, one that exists because of the author, but the author does not exist because of the space. I define heterotopic space as Michel Foucault does in his lecture, "Of Other Spaces," in which he generally says a heterotopia is an "other" space and a counter-site to a real site. More specifically, I am asserting that Equiano, through his *Narrative*, creates a space that is counter or other to his real life, creating a heterotopia of compensation, as is defined in Foucault's "Sixth Principle" of heterotopias in which he observes, "their role is to create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled (Foucault 25). Equiano did not write himself into existence as Gates argues; rather, he wrote another and an "other" space in which he *could* exist as a free man, neither a subordinate nor a subordinator, through language, negotiating the very different worlds in which he lived.

A thorough examination of the language and specific words of Equiano's text reveals diction that writes the author in to a heterotopic space of his design and authority, a space in which he is not a subordinated subject; rather, he is comfortably in control. Remembering that biographies, autobiographies, and slave narratives are all reconstructions of a life and fictions,

Equiano, then, employed the genre of autobiography and slave narrative to create a life and space in which he was master. Slave narratives, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. notes, are a means by which, “blacks...tried to write themselves out of slavery, a slavery even more profound than mere physical bondage” (Gates 1901). In other words, Gates says that slave narratives are stories in which black authors select life events and use the tool of the oppressor, language, to become tangible people, viable human beings enslaved by nobody. Slave narratives are attempts by black authors to become truly freed persons.

While I agree with Gates’s ideas, I must disagree with his inclusion of Equiano within this conversation. Equiano does not simply write himself into being; rather, he exploits his unique positions and uses the English language to write a space that represents his physical position in the world, one in which he is neither slave nor truly freed person. Equiano’s words serve more purpose than to simply write the author into being; the work is a means by which the author creates a safe alternate place, one that is neither fully free nor fully enslaved, but one in which the author comfortably fits. Autobiography blended with slave narrative is a perfect vehicle for Equiano to create this unique and liberating space as by its very nature, the work will be a blend of fact and fiction. Because this interesting genre was still emerging in the eighteenth century, Equiano had some latitude and was able to combine fact, fiction, and place emphasis on the oppressions and liberations he encountered throughout life, creating a space in which he truly fit.

To examine this idea further, I will closely read Equiano’s *Narrative*, specifically looking at language that places the author both within and outside of groups. I hope to find that the author’s specific word choices indicate a heterotopic space of the author’s design in which he rejects a binary existence and forced inclusion in one group or another. For example, in

describing the people from which he, the author, comes and remembering the vivid details he provides, he fully severs himself from his community in passages like the following:

The natives are extremely cautious about poison. When they buy any eatable the seller kisses it all round before the buyer, to shew him it is not poisoned; and the same is done when any meat or drink is presented, particularly to a stranger. We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest.” (Equiano 29)

The author begins this passage with full distance, moving further than the use of “they” or “them,” to referring to his community as “the natives.” Equiano is completely severed from this group and their rituals regarding poison; however, in the next line he rejoins them with his own inclusion, using the word “we.” This inclusion may simply be preparing the reader for another distinction Equiano reveals – that he is special, having received good omens by the community elders, because a poisonous snake did not bite him when in between his feet. In other words, Equiano intentionally reveals to the reader that while he is briefly part of this group, he is remarkable, uncommon, and separate. I assert that closely reading the *Narrative* will yield several examples of this negotiation of groups and spaces on Equiano’s part.

Incorporating other scholarship is also necessary to fully illuminate my thesis, as this will provide multiple, useful lenses through which to examine Equiano’s writing. One such useful lens comes from Susan Marren’s article, “Between Slavery and Freedom: The Transgressive Self in Olaudah Equiano’s Autobiography.” Marren astutely observes, “The I in autobiography liberates the author from the constraints of corporeality. In re-creating the self in writing, one can ascribe to oneself traits denied one in the material world and reject traits ascribed to one by others” (Marren 94). She goes on to apply this to Equiano, asserting that writing his



autobiography is a transgressive act with the ultimate goal of drawing attention and sympathy to the abolitionist movement of eighteenth-century England. Her observation of the liberation found in the written word is both useful and astute; however, I do not believe Equiano simply held transgressive ends as his motivation for writing; rather, the liberated I, within the walls of the *Narrative*, finds a comfortable other space in which to exist. Samantha Earley also comments on Equiano's authorial position in saying, "there have been very few studies of Equiano's religious conversion and his use of religious discourse in constructing himself and his slave narrator in a position of centrality and authority when speaking about issues of slavery and freedom, evil and goodness, wickedness and morality" (Earley 2). Earley notes that Equiano's is a constructed position; however, she says this is because of his adoption of Christianity and use of religious discourse throughout the novel. She adds that this places Equiano in a central, constructed position. This is a useful approach and one that I will incorporate in my thesis; however, Equiano's use of religious discourse is only one method through which the author writes a space for himself. Moreover, I will argue his is not a central position but, rather, one outside a gradient or binary, with freedman and slave being the extreme endpoints.

Wilfred Samuels argues that the *Narrative* has a discernible structure and strong association with Africa. Because of this, he notes, "it is possible to argue that Equiano's muted voice camouflages what one might deem the single most important purpose of his narrative: the recreation of a 'single self' which is related to an idealized African identity that Equiano wishes to claim as his legacy" (Samuels 66). Samuels views Equiano's *Narrative* as a tool in which the author attempts to claim a constructed self strongly affiliated with an idealized Africa. In other words, Equiano is writing a self based on an idealized, fictitious, constructed self. This, too, is a useful lens through which to view the *Narrative*, understanding that the author is disentangling

an identity from a tangled web of constructed, idealized identities. I do not think, though, that Equiano was attempting to claim his legacy related to an African identity; rather, I will argue that he simultaneously claims and rejects his African identity, thus developing an other, heterotopic, liminal space.

To best address both my argument and current Equiano scholarship, I intend to organize my thesis into two sections, preceded by the introduction, in which I will briefly discuss the complexity of Equiano's narrative, my argument, scholarship surrounding the author and text, and finally, how my argument negotiates and differs from this scholarship. My first section will further develop my discussion of Equiano's authorial position and the scholarship surrounding this author and genre. I will incorporate a variety of areas of thought, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s essays on slave narratives, Foucault's notion of heterotopia<sup>2</sup>, various other scholarship that deals with spaces or narratives, and ultimately, Equiano's text itself. Together, these resources should yield a comprehensive examination of the function of the author's created space in his text. Moreover, this first section will be comprised of evaluation of Equiano's use of language, such as pronouns, as well as his childhood experiences. This will show a simultaneous distancing and inclusion of groups to which the author does not fully belong, ultimately resulting in the necessity of his *Narrative*. Lastly, I will turn to Equiano's letters, both within and outside of the novel, showing another level of the author's constructed identity through writing. Ultimately, each section will serve as a lens through which to view Equiano's created, constructed, safe space in which he has authorial control. The text, then, should reveal itself as a tangible object that results in an intangible space in which the author is neither one nor the other,

---

<sup>2</sup> Because I have defined heterotopia as I am using the term, according to Foucault's definition, I will refer to the concept simply as "heterotopia" for the duration of this paper.

but simply, eternally, is.

## 2 EVALUATION OF LANGUAGE

The story of one person, told by that person, as lived through their own senses and recreated through their own memories, is a fictional account of “I,” or an autobiography. The autobiographical I is an incohesive subject not bound to a linear progression of events as they truthfully occurred; rather, I is freed from constraints of consistency and allowed to flourish as the author, the subject, as I, prefers. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*, is an autobiography, a story the author tells of himself and his life, that both supports his goals as an abolitionist and businessman, and frees him, at least within the text, from his actual, physical self. Additionally, as Susan Marren writes, “In re-creating the self in writing, one can ascribe to oneself traits denied one in the material world and self becomes real” (94). The self, or I, then, can be reshaped, revisualized, remembered, and redeveloped in an autobiography, because the author is the divine creator of the work, selecting which details will be strung together to create the self and story of I. These details, once committed to print, actualize the created self as real. Marren asserts that this creation of selves is precisely what happened in Equiano’s *Narrative*, and that, “Equiano wrote in response to imperatives: on the one hand, an internal compulsion to establish himself as a speaking subject and, on the other, an external compulsion to serve the antislavery movement” (94). This assertion of created selves within the text is logical and reasonable and, because of the definition of autobiography, true, Equiano’s text concomitantly functions as a created safe space as well. With the writing of Equiano’s autobiographical *Narrative*, the author had the authority and ability to create selves and, with the addition of every word to his manuscript, create an expanding, heterotopic space with which to create the selves – an option only available to an eighteenth-century freed slave turned businessman and abolitionist – from within a text. In other

words, the writing of this work, this autobiography, created a unique intangible space, heretofore and henceforth unreplicated, in which the author was free to select portions of his life to reveal and construct new, free, transgressive, yet ideal, unencumbered selves. Equiano notes, too, and not insignificantly, that his *Narrative* does not conform to the genre standard as his text is rather uninteresting, which can only be taken as tongue-in-cheek, given the author's story, written in English, not Igbo, and for what purpose the text is written for. To that end, he makes sure to note the *Narrative* is not his idea and that he is not seeking personal gain from its writing. Rather, he hopes, "If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interests of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified" (20). Because he prefaces his entire work with a list of subscribers, which includes His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, His Royal Highness the Duke of York, His Grace the Duke of Northumberland, and several other members of Parliament and the highest classes of English society, we may assume that some of the requesters – his friends he speaks of – may include the span of English society, from members of Parliament to Equiano's peers, businessmen like himself.

Closely reading the text reveals shifts in language, leading to shifts in identity. The *Narrative* enables Equiano to shift among multiple identities with the use of pronominal shifts, and language that is inclusive, exclusive, or othered. Specifically, he vacillates among several groups, such as African, Englishman, Christian, slave, and slave trader, never fully aligning himself with one identity, and the true beauty of the text is that his writing within a space of his own creation allows this dynamic fluctuation and toeing of a proverbial line. Thus far, much of the scholarship surrounding Equiano's *Narrative* focuses on the content of the words, their teleology, and the identities they create. This is good, valuable scholarship with limitless

possibilities. My emphasis, however, deviates slightly in that my examination is focused on the purpose of the text and what space *it* creates. Evaluation of the words is essential because they form and give shape to the heterotopic space of the text that is the entire *Narrative*. Equiano notes this fluctuation of identities, as well the latitude afforded by his writing, in the opening of the *Narrative*:

It is therefore, I confess, not a little hazardous in a private and obscure individual, and a stranger too, thus to solicit the indulgent attention of the public; especially when I own offer here the history of neither a saint, a hero, nor a tyrant. I believe there are few events in my life, which have not happened to many: it is true the incidents of it are numerous; and did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great: but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countryman, I regard myself as a particular favourite. (19)

With these lines, Equiano begins to acknowledge his multiplicity – he is not a saint, hero, or tyrant – and also, he reveals himself as a sort of representative case, recounting the experiences of many persons in his text. The most curious part of this opening is his indirect statement that he does not consider himself an European, a concept he both reaffirms and contradicts throughout the entire *Narrative*. Who wrote the *Narrative* may initially seem obvious, but with further scrutiny, the matter of Equiano's identity becomes just as complicated and rich as the work itself.

The shifts, instabilities, contradictions, and inconsistencies, illuminates the *Narrative*, revealing precisely how the author wrote his heterotopic space. The heterotopic space takes form, in the text's shifts and instabilities, and it is through the contradictions and inconsistencies that the space for multiple selves and allegiances is cultivated. The shifts begin with the first

page of the text, in the form of a letter to Parliament. Before the narrative begins, the reader is presented with a dedicatory letter, written by Equiano to the Parliament members of Great Britain, in which his purpose for writing the text is clearly given. He describes the book's, "chief design, ...is to excite in your august assemblies a sense of compassion for the miseries which the Slave-Trade has entailed on my unfortunate countryman" (Equiano 7). His use of "my" clearly indicates his acknowledging he belongs to a group; specifically, victims of the slave trade. The opening pages of Equiano's autobiography, however, belie this idea with the use of contradictory words in which he is both directly addressing the reader and recounting with vivid detail, the community in which he grew up. The first page of *The Narrative* hints at Equiano's feeling that he belongs neither here nor there, with this group or that. He writes, "did I consider myself an European, I might say my sufferings were great: but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a *particular favourite of Heaven*, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life" (Equiano 19). These words suggest Equiano feels more closely allied to his Igbo countrymen than the Europeans he is now surrounded with. He is separate from his countrymen, though, as he has been isolated as a particular favorite of Heaven. He is not European but he is distinct from his countrymen as well.

He goes on in the next few pages to say, "we are a nation of dancers," and "our manners are simple, our luxuries are few" (Equiano 20, 22). He also talks of "our vegetables," "our buildings," and "our women" (Equiano 21, 22). His repeated use of "our" suggests that he is obviously claiming his heritage, his upbringing, and the community from which he comes. Equiano weaves contradictory words throughout these vivid descriptions though, continually calling attention to his distance from a group he claims in a following line. For example, he writes:

Our tillage is exercised in a large plain or common, some hours walk from our dwellings, and all the neighbours resort thither in a body. They use no beasts of husbandry; and their only instruments are hoes, axes, shovels, and beaks, or pointed iron to dig with. Sometimes we are visited by locusts, which come in large clouds, so as to darken the air, and destroy our harvest. (Equiano 25)

This is but one example of Equiano's subtle dance that includes belonging to a group, removing the self entirely and observing from a distance, back to uniting with the group. In this passage, Equiano claims membership in an agricultural community, distantly observing the methods and tools of that community, later rejoining the group in their suffering the loss of harvest because of locusts. He is creating his own space, with the text, that lies somewhere between here and there.

Equiano, just a few lines later, repeats this subtle stepping in and out in writing:

This common is often the theatre of war; and therefore when our people go out to till their land, they not only go in a body, but generally take their arms with them for fear of a surprise; and when they apprehend an invasion they guard the avenues to their dwellings, by driving sticks into the ground, which are so sharp at one end as to pierce the foot, and are generally dipt in poison. (25)

Equiano is writing retroactively, recounting memories of his original community. He identifies himself as part of this group with the use of "our people;" however, he immediately draws another distance by referring to this group as they for the rest of the passage. He could have just as easily continued the use of "our," but instead switches to the language of distance, making the "their" and "they" references noticeable. Again, the author negotiates his own space, one afforded by the privileges of distance and authority, that lies somewhere between two groups.



In describing the people from which he comes, remembering the vivid details he provides, he fully severs himself from his community with:

The natives are extremely cautious about poison. When they buy any eatable the seller kisses it all round before the buyer, to shew him it is not poisoned; and the same is done when any meat or drink is presented, particularly to a stranger. We have serpents of different kinds, some of which are esteemed ominous when they appear in our houses, and these we never molest.” (29)

The author begins this passage with full distance, moving further than the use of they or them, to referring to his community as “the natives.” Equiano is completely severed from this group and their rituals regarding poison; however, in the next line he rejoins them with his own inclusion, using the word “we.” This inclusion may simply be preparing the reader for another distinction Equiano reveals – that he is special, having received good omens by the community elders, because a poisonous snake did not bite him when in between his feet. In other words, Equiano intentionally reveals to the reader that while he is briefly part of this group, he is remarkable, uncommon, and separate.

As Gates notes, Equiano's narrative contains a talking book episode which illustrates absence, self, and being:

I had often seen my master and Dick employed in reading; and I had a great curiosity to talk to the books, as I thought they did; and so to learn how all things had a beginning: for that purpose I have often taken up a book, and have talked to it, and then put my ears to it, when alone, in hopes it would answer me; and I have been very much concerned when I found it remained silent. (Equiano 48)

Equiano wrote his *Narrative* many years after the events described take place, always writing in the past tense – except in this episode. He obviously has a mastery of the English language, both spoken and written, yet his use of the present-perfect tense, with, “I have often,” “have talked to it,” “in hopes it would answer me,” all indicate an ongoing practice, and an act of intentionality in his writing. Undoubtedly, Equiano did not continue talking to his books at the time he wrote this narrative; rather, his use of the present-perfect tense, with his use of “I have” language, the only instance I find in the entire text, must allude to a larger idea. Perhaps the allusion is, as Gates suggests, that the trope speaks to the absence of the black subject; perhaps, though, Equiano is using this trope to indicate the obvious disparity in his positions of slave and literate, freed, educated male. In other words, language has the power to free but also, even if one is literate and fluent in the language of the oppressor, they may remain in a disjointed space, not belonging in any one space.

Equiano's feelings of alienation are also evident in the face-washing episode involving his playmate. He writes, “I had often observed that when her mother washed her face it looked very rosy; but when she washed mine it did not look so: I therefore tried oftentimes myself if I could not by washing make my face of the same colour as my little play-mate (Mary), but it was all in vain; and I now began to be mortified at the difference in our complexions” (Equiano 49). In the previous episode, a book, or more specifically, words, separated Equiano from those around him whereas becoming aware of differences in skin tone cause this separation. In an attempt to be like those around him, to fit, he attempts, unsuccessfully, to wash away his skin color so that he might look like Mary. That Equiano was a slave, kidnapped from his home and forced to obey a master, does not seem to illustrate the differences between he and Mary like that

of outward physical appearance. He cannot wash away his blackness; therefore, his attempts at being one of the group or an insider fail, rendering him separate and distanced.

Another example of Equiano's not necessarily fully belonging to any one group comes with his search for religion. He mentions, very briefly, that cleanliness is paramount to his people, as a matter of "decency" and religion (Equiano 28). He likens the rituals to that of Judaism. Later, he goes on to compare the plight of his people to Jewish people in saying:

And here I cannot forbear suggesting what has long struck me very forcibly, namely, the strong analogy which even by this sketch, imperfect as it is, appears to prevail in the manners and customs of my countrymen and those of the Jews, before they reached the Land of Promise, and particularly the patriarchs while they were yet in that pastoral state which is described in Genesis which would induce me to think that the one people had sprung from the other. (Equiano 29)

The author establishes both an ally and a distance with this comparison. He is likening the experiences of Jewish people to that of his people, cultivating a bond between two groups. On the other hand, what bonds these two groups is their treatment by the ruling classes and religion, thus they are united in their forced subordination and relegation to the periphery.

Later, "Equiano learns that he 'could not go to heaven, unless [he] was baptized'" (Davidson 27). He communicates his desire to participate in the Christian ceremony and ultimately his master allows it. Of this occasion, Equiano writes, "So I was baptized at St. Margaret's church, Westminster, in February 1759, by my present name" (Davidson 27). This event reveals two very important details in the shaping of Equiano's identity. He turns from the religion he previously refers to, that of his people, to Christianity, the religion of his master. By adopting the religious faith of his captors, he further distances himself from the community that

he aligns with and simultaneously distances himself from. Furthermore, he was given a different name and baptized under it. The name, Gustavus Vassa, given by his master, replaced the name Olaudah Equiano, that which his parents named him. That he was baptized under a different name is not remarkable as most slaves were not even allowed the basic human right of keeping their own name. Rather, they were forced to don that of their master, making theirs a perverse parental/child relationship. That Vassa kept the name given to him by Pascal, even after he bought his freedom, and until his death, indicates a sort of identity shift. Specifically, he writes, retroactively, of himself as Igbo and uses the language of we; however, he refers to himself as Gustavas, using the language of they. Obviously, reclaiming a taken name is not incumbent upon anyone but the lack of doing so may indicate the author's inability to reconcile and negotiate two cultures or two selves.

This discussion is not meant to imply that Equiano's negotiation of space and identity is born of his desire to do so. Rather, given the circumstances of his birth, whether that be in Africa or South Carolina, one fact is indisputable – he was a slave. Equiano's knowledge that he did not fit into white culture, with the privileges and rights of a white person, were made readily apparent to him throughout his life. He was a black man, a lesser-class citizen, forced to perform within the discourse of the white man, his oppressor. This performance is exemplified with Equiano's use of white face. About trying to negotiate the freedom of a man from his ship, he writes, "My being known to [the captors] occasioned me to use the following deception: I whitened my face that they might not know me, and this had its desired effect" (Equiano 136). His use of white face, of disguise, of covering self and identity, was the only way to perform the discourse of a white man in order to possibly free others. This deception has further significance when we remember Equiano's account of his being captured by a black man and eventually

being sold to a white man who ultimately sold Equiano his tenuous freedom, or manumission, which is described in his *Narrative*. In other words, a white man, in a perverse way, set him free, only causing a schism within the author because from then on he had a fragile freedom that was still vulnerable to white privilege, forcing Equiano to vigilantly and perpetually negotiate his identity as situations warranted.

While Equiano was forced to operate within a discourse of oppression, he used language not only to create a space in which he belonged, but in his abolitionist efforts. These efforts further point to his not fully belonging to any one group. Indeed he was a former and freed slave, but he was also an educated, business-savvy, black man with an exceptional command of the English language operating in a white-dominated land. He was a resident of neither community. Equiano introduces his disdain of slavery early in the narrative, looking to science, not as a measure of reason, but as an explanation for the absurdity of prejudice:

These instances,... it is hoped may tend also to remove the prejudice that some conceive against the natives of Africa on account of their colour. Surely the minds of the Spaniards did not change with their complexions! Are there not causes enough to which the apparent inferiority of an African may be ascribed, without limiting the goodness of God, and supposing he forbore to stamp understanding on certainly his own image, because 'carved in ebony.' Might it not naturally be ascribed to their situation? When they come among Europeans, they are ignorant of their language, religion, manners, and customs. Are any pains taken to teach them these? Are they treated as men? Does not slavery itself depress the mind, and extinguish all its fire and every noble sentiment?

(Equiano 31)

He goes on to refer to Africans as “barbarous” and “uncivilized,” rationalizing that at some point Europeans were in the same position, and because they were clearly not created inferior, it stands that neither are Africans. He ends his biological appeal quoting from the Bible, citing a religious authority on ethics, morality, and conduct. Equiano, in writing his abolitionist sentiments this way, distances himself in two ways. Again, he uses the language of they when describing what skills and traits Africans lack and their entry into European lands. He refers to African natives as a distant, observable group to which he does not belong with his use of distancing they. Additionally, he uses sound logic in explaining the absurdity of prejudice, and, as a black author who includes a description of European history, speaks from a position of subordinated rationality. Furthermore, his use of a biblical quotation at the end places Equiano in a unique position of authority. He, by quoting the sacred text, is neither African nor European, neither black nor white; he is Christian, and both a religious and moral authority. In other words, his quoting the Bible places Equiano, because of language, in a position of other, of religious authority, not European yet not an “uncivilized” African. He has used language, then, to create a space to accommodate his isolation.

Equiano deftly shows there is no biological or religious explanation for the oppression of others, thus addressing scientific or spiritual rationalizations. Additionally, he approaches abolition from a financial angle in a letter to the Queen, advocating trade between Africa and Great Britain rather than the current practice of slavery. He notes, “if the blacks were permitted to remain in their own country, they would double themselves every fifteen years. In proportion to such increase will be the demand for manufactures” (178). He goes on to assure the Queen that the abolition of slavery, “is trading upon safe grounds. A commercial intercourse with Africa opens an inexhaustible source of wealth to the manufacturing interests of Great Britain,

and to all which the slave trade is an objection” (177). He appeals to the Queen's financial sense, again, with infallible logic, demonstrating the monetary benefit of ending the slave trade. Again, Equiano is writing from a position of other in that he is not in a position of power to abolish slavery, yet he refers to the Africans as they, separating himself from his native land. Throughout the narrative, Equiano appeals to the logic, reason, and religion of oppressors, removing himself from the position of African or Englishman; rather, he is appealing from a heterotopic space of his own design, created through language.

Religion is an integral part of Equiano's life that places him in an elevated, righteous, moral position, regardless of skin tone. He takes the responsibility of others' salvation and his role of outsider very seriously; when those aboard his ship are drinking, he says, “I could not help thinking, that, if any of these people had been lost, God would charge me with their lives, which, perhaps was one cause of my labouring so hard for their preservation, and indeed every one of them afterwards seemed so sensible of the service I had rendered them; and while we were on the key I was a kind of chieftain among them” (115). Equiano is again outside, not engaging with his shipmates; rather, he is distanced, through the word of God, and left to lament their conduct. This episode, too, is reminiscent of the earlier incident with the snake between his feet that did not bite him. In both instances he is marked as special, as unique, as other, and as unequal.

Equiano perhaps expresses his feelings of isolation and the power of language best when he recounts his time in Virginia County in which he, “saw few or none of our native Africans, and not one soul who could talk to me” (44). His inability to communicate with others through language left Equiano completely isolated and oppressed. He adds, “I was now exceedingly miserable, and thought myself worse off than any of the rest of my companions; for they could

talk to each other, but I had no person to speak to that I could understand” (44). Language, then, be it written or spoken, has both the power to liberate and isolate, themes seen throughout the text.

The last part of the *Narrative* is comprised solely of reproductions of letters Equiano mailed to various persons of power in which he advocates abolition. Letters and words represent Equiano in these communications, not social or economic position nor skin color. Through language alone, Equiano speaks from a heterotopic space of his creation, appealing to senses of reason, humanity, logic, and religion and again, weaving in and out of belonging and being othered, as has been seen throughout the text. Equiano's narrative is personal, a recollection of experiences, feelings, and thoughts to the reader, a relationship he establishes on the first page. By including reproductions of his letters as part of his *Narrative*, both on the first page and in the twelfth and final chapter of the book, he is forcing the reader into an othered position, allowed access to this part of the man, Equiano, strictly with his permission, making the reader a voyeur of sorts. In other words, through language, Equiano communicates with the reader directly but also, later, distances the reader with the same tool, placing the reader as an outsider looking in, as an other. Equiano includes and distances himself in these letters from Europeans and Africans, referring to his “African brethren,” and signing one of the letters as, “The Oppressed Ethiopian,” while simultaneously referring to himself as a, “dutiful servant” to the Queen and signing another letter as the, “late Commissary to the black Poor going to AFRICA,” referring to his military title. (Equiano, 168-178). Equiano is both an African and an obedient Englishman, yet he is also completely neither; thus, he must create a space for his existence and being through the text.



### 3 LETTERS

In his *Narrative*, Equiano cultivates a heterotopic space in which he is confined to no single identity or story; rather, he is able to both be an Englishman and an Igbo, a superordinating and subordinating power, simultaneously rejecting and affiliating with both identities as he saw fit or necessary. With the addition of every word and letter in his *Narrative*, the heterotopic space of his design grows, changing shape and form, accommodating every story, detail, and image its creator wanted the work to contain. Equiano uses various rhetorical techniques to achieve this development of his *Narrative*, such as storytelling, chronological writing, narrative writing, reporting, fictional writing, and epistolary writing, which had become a popular genre in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. Epistolary novels are works that became a common and popular literary form in the eighteenth-century, providing a pseudo-autobiographical medium whereby a narrator told his or her story through a series of letters. This genre adds to the realism of a work because of the assumed and supposed authenticity of the documents it contains, which seems to be an archive of sorts of events that actually happened. The form, in other words, mimics the sort of archiving we do in everyday life, be it in the form of letters or other documents, and is successful because of its assumed reliability, validity, and authenticity of documentation. Additionally, letters that compose a novel or are contained within a novel allow the author to provide details from a point of view other than the narrator's and, also, progress the text without demanding a direct relationship between narrator and reader. Documents, while part of a work, are not part of the narrated text and, thus, are a tool for the author and offer a different point of view to the reader. Equiano capitalizes on the then popular form of the epistolary novel and included letters, and references to writing letters, within his *Narrative*.

Equiano's text begins with a letter to the men of Parliament, with recognition of their powerful position by addressing them as, "the Lords Spiritual and Temporal, and the Commons of the Parliament of Great Britain," which is printed in much larger text than the subsequent letter, and is, despite its lack of verb, punctuated as a complete sentence. This mode of address was typical for the mid-eighteenth century in Britain, and addressing the letter in accordance with the common practice of the time, Equiano immediately projects an identity: that of a literate Englishman. Equiano begins his entire *Narrative*, then, already developing his multifaceted identity with words. His address demonstrates to the Lords and Commons, as well as any readers of the work, that Olaudah Equiano is an Englishman, worthy of writing to those in power, and who is familiar with conventions and practices of the lettered world. Similarly, he closes the letter in a common fashion:

I am,  
MY LORDS AND GENTLEMEN,  
Your most obedient,  
And devoted humble Servant,  
Olaudah Equiano,  
or  
Gustavas Vassa

The format of the letters and the structure of the closing are, as with the salutation, devices Equiano uses to assert a portion of his identity. The first line of the closing quite simply, and most tellingly, makes a profound assertion – "I am" (7). This two-word sentence is the only instance in the entire *Narrative* in which Equiano does not affiliate himself with one group or another, one identity or another, or one power versus another. Instead, he is a man and an

author, who simply and powerfully, is. Once again, he follows British convention, and capitalizes the letter's addressees, and moves them over to a position of prominence, much further left on the page than the declarative "I am," effectively subordinating the subject I to the political powers of 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain. The next line aligns with the first, and reinforces Equiano's deferential position by saying, "Your most obedient" (7). While the author is both an Englishman and a man who simply is, he notes that he is a good subject who obeys the governing powers. The next line is perhaps the most curious of the entire closing. The author once again moves the text to the far left, aligning with the capitalized addressee line in its vertical position of prominence, and writes, "And devoted humble Servant" (7). Beginning this line with the conjunction "and" indicates there is more to Equiano than what was described in the previous line, that of an obedient author and subject. His "and" stands almost defiant, equal, and in opposition to the large, capitalized, powerful, lords and gentleman. This belies the actual words of the line, in which Equiano describes himself as devoted, humble, and a servant. He reiterates, with the word choice of devoted, that he is an Englishman, with an allegiance to Britain, despite his being called an African in the *Narrative's* title. He is claiming two identities, and, already, his multiplicity is unfolding before the reader's eyes. Equiano refers to himself as humble, suggesting not a lack of ego, but an acknowledgement of his social position. He is humble and deferential, a loyal subject. The last word of this line is as telling as the first, in which Equiano names himself "Servant." While is likely referring to his past as a former slave, he may also be referring to himself, simultaneously, as an English subject, who is by definition, a servant to the Crown. Additionally, by capitalizing the word Servant, Equiano has placed emphasis on this noun, turning it into a proper name, rather than a generic label applied to one of a group, be it slave or subject. He is not, then, the average servant according to either definition

of the word. Instead, he is more than a freed slave and better than simply a loyal British subject—he is a Servant.

Finally, he closes with two names: his original, given name and his appointed, slave name. He separates these two names with a simple conjunction “or” and positions this small word exactly at the midpoint of both names, which are of approximately equal length. By offering these two names, as he does in the title, Equiano acknowledges and asserts that he is both of these men. By positioning the word “or” exactly in the middle of two vertically aligned names, the author indicates that neither name nor identity subordinates the other. He is comfortably both of these people. This, too, is a point made obvious by the title and text, but deserves further mention. Specifically, Equiano is claiming and living both of these identities, and is one man with very different stories. By definition, if he is one man occupying more than one space or life, he can also never fully or entirely be one or the other, never fully filling one space. Equiano, with his alignments of text and specific, intentional word choices, cultivates in his salutation and closing, a multifaceted identity, eluding any one, specific categorization and begins to create a heterotopic space in which he is not obligated to be this or that and in which he has the freedom to assert, simply and powerfully, “I am” (7).

The opening letter is written as a sort of preface for the work, seemingly laying both the text and the author at the members of Parliaments’ feet. Aware of his actual social standing, Equiano defers *his* position to *their* collective position, with words such as “unlettered,” “African,” and “instrument,” asking that they both read and react to his work (7). The first line after the salutation nods to Equiano’s recognition of his own real-life position by saying, “Permit me, with the greatest deference and respect, to lay at your feet the following genuine Narrative” (7). He accomplishes this entreaty by appealing to their authority and religiosity, as men in

positions of power, as Christians, and as men of compassion—reminding the men of the supposed function of Christian government through flattery.

Calling again on the integrity of others, Equiano writes to the “Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of his Majesty’s Treasury,” a letter he deems significant enough to be included in his *Narrative*. The author’s purpose in writing this letter is to defend himself and offer his account of events that took place. Approximately halfway through the letter, after describing his own impeccable character and right action, Equiano states his purpose in to the Lords Commissioners and notes that:

he [Equiano] therefore has every reason to believe that his conduct has been grossly misrepresented to your Lordships; and he is the more confirmed in his opinion, because, by opposing measures of others concerned in the same expedition, which tended to defeat your Lordships’ human intentions, and to put the government to a very considerable additional expense, he created a number of enemies, whose misrepresentations, he has too much reason to believe, laid the foundation of his dismissal. (174)

Equiano is tactfully addressing the testimonies of those who spoke against his character and conduct while conducting an official job in Sierra Leone. Believing he acted morally right and in the interests of the crown and thrift, and that his detractors were simply ashamed to have been bested by Equiano, the author speaks on his own behalf, as a sort of rebuttal. The letter is not solely intended to defend the author’s character; he also sought payment for a job he believed was well done. He notes that the letter must have been effective because, “in the space of some few months afterwards, without hearing,” he was compensated for his performing his duties and given four months wages (175).

This letter serves more purpose than the author seeking simple financial recompense. Once again, Equiano uses the letter, the epistolary form, to tell a story within his larger *Narrative*. This story is a tale of a one man, a freed slave and an Englishman, addressing Lords Commissioners of his Majesty's Treasury, a governmental body responsible for domestic economic policies and finance, as a citizen who has been wronged. Equiano's character, according to the letter, was besmirched which led to his non-payment, dismissal, and denial of, "the advantage [from his employment] which he reasonably might have expected to have derived therefrom" (174). This letter story-within-a-story affords Equiano the opportunity to not only successfully communicate with the Lords of the Treasury, but also to communicate with his readership, including his honorable and magnificent list of subscribers. With this tool he is able to tell a broad audience about his character twice. He actually narrates events and sets the letter up for the reader, describing the circumstances that forced him to pen such communication. Then, within the letter, he reinforces his impeccable character and lonely position as the one person on the mission who had the Crown's best interest at heart by again describing his character and actions. He is not just a former slave or an Englishman; rather, as he refers to himself in the letter, he is both a memorialist and a petitioner – a man with a voice.

Equiano's authorial voice shifts in this letter from the first person to the third person, a shift not previously seen in *The Narrative*. Specifically, the actual letter he sent to the Right Honourable the Lords Commissioners of his Majesty's Treasury pleads the case of Olaudah Equiano or Gustava Vassa, but rather than do so from the strong and personal first-person voice seen throughout the entire text, Equiano refers to himself as petitioner, memorialist, and uses the pronouns his, him, and he in reference to himself. The letter's addressees, on the other hand, are referred to in the second-person voice, typically as "your Lordships." The play between first and

second person voice is a technique or device used by the author that might be understood to serve a purpose other than deferential respect. Specifically, in referring to this governmental body as you, he makes the letter personal, addressed to each Lord as an individual, not the body as a whole. He is speaking directly to each member, not the whole. Moreover, by using the third person voice in reference to himself, Equiano uses this letter as a testimony. The author highlights, in two pages preceding this letter, the events that transpired in his fulfillment of his duties. After noting a disagreement about the allocation of England's resources with an agent in Sierra Leone, Equiano appealed to, "the testimony of Captain Thompson, of the Nautilus, who convoyed us, to whom I applied in February 1787 for remedy, when I had remonstrated to the agent in vain, and even brought him to be a witness of the injustice and oppression I complained of" (172). Equiano looked to Captain Thompson for an actual testimony, a voice other than his own, to speak on his behalf and clear both the matter and his name. Unfortunately, this was a fruitless effort. The letter does not mention this testimony. The inclusion of this detail would have only taken a line or two and would surely better the appearance of his cause to the Lords. Instead, Equiano's use of the third person voice serves as a testimony unto itself. He is speaking about himself on his own behalf. This specific letter may, then, be viewed as an address to the individual Lords on behalf of their petitioner, Equiano, seeking resolution to the attack on his character and, also, compensation for a job well done. He is not just a subject, freed slave, Englishman, memorialist, or petitioner – he is of such character and moral standing that while not explicitly doing so, he may and will speak on his own behalf, testifying to his own cause to each Lord, individually.

Equiano also includes in his *Narrative*, a letter written to him, about him, in which he receives his official orders from the Royal Navy. Both the text prior to the letter and the letter

itself speak to the importance and stature of Equiano. At this point in *The Narrative*, Equiano begins to make his abolitionist aim a bit clearer for the reader. The Commission requested that Equiano meet with them regarding potential future employment, as he, “had the honour of being known” (171).

When I came there they informed me of the intention of government; and as they seemed to think me qualified to superintend part of the undertaking, they asked me to go with the black poor to Africa. I pointed out to them many objections to my going; and particularly I expressed some difficulties on the account of the slave dealers, as I would certainly oppose their traffic in the human species by every means in my power. However these objections were over-ruled by the gentlemen of the committee, who prevailed on me to go, and recommended me to the honourable Comssimioners {Commissioners} of his Majesty’s Navy as a proper person to act as commissary for government in the intended expedition; and they accordingly appointment me in November 1786 to that office, and gave me sufficient power to act for the government in the capacity of commissary, having received my warrant and the following order. (171)

This preface to the actual order, which he duplicates verbatim in the text, introduces the emerging abolitionist that is Olaudah Equiano. While he vacillates between various affiliations in the text, such as African, Englishman, former slave, esteemed gentleman, he finally begins to take a definitive position at this point – he will oppose...by every means in his power. Equiano may not commit to a specific group, but he will commit to this cause, someone who will fight on behalf of slaves and trafficked humans.

His ability to fight for an unvoiced or oppressed group, through his writing and letters, also points to something not explicitly mentioned in the text. This passage is a sort of



metamorphosis of agency for the author, who was once, presumably, a trafficked human himself. Now he stands in a position of power, a word he uses at least twice in that short passage, which is a sharp contrast from the opening chapter of the *Narrative*, in which he was a helpless, kidnapped, African child. Olaudah Equiano has power and, as this passage shows, is beginning to understand that not only does he have this power, but he has the agency to employ it as he deems necessary. The honorable Commissioners, knowing his intentions and objections, gave him this position to act on behalf of the government. While it may be argued they did not believe his objections or, more importantly, his intended actions in response to his objections, another plausible explanation, one that Equiano would have the reader believe, is that he was of such impeccable moral character that they believed whatever opposition he offered would fall within the Navy's best interest – or at least not violate a code of conduct or contradict the Crown's efforts in Africa.

The position itself offered by his Majesty's Navy is also telling and an important detail that Equiano includes. Because the author was known to a, "select committee of gentlemen," who thought him a good candidate for this mission, he was chosen to escort and "superintend" several, "Africans from hence to their native quarter" (171). What this detail reveals is another accolade to Equiano's character and may explain its prominence in the text. Specifically, Equiano is of such good character, morally and ethically, that he was sought after, chosen, selected, and he was solicited, to undergo a mission for the Crown. Moreover, he was not asked to merely be on the ship as he had been so many times before; rather, he was in a position of power and authority, both because of his orders and his natural role as liaison between the passengers and, "philanthropic individuals," that arranged the passages. Lastly, Equiano's proclamation of objections and intended actions to, "traffic in the human species," also nods,

from yet another angle, to his position of authority and power. While he was once a trafficked boy and man, he is now in a position of such esteem, authority, and regard that he has voice and influence to resist and object oppressive forces. His inclusion of these details, preface, and this letter reveal a space, created by Equiano, in which he has power and authority, despite his ultimate dismissal from the position.

Immediately following the author's description of his coup in which he was paid for his back wages, Equiano includes another letter to an even more esteemed recipient than the Royal Navy – Queen Charlotte of England. This letter stands apart from all other letters in the text both because of the addressee and the topic of the correspondence. Equiano writes this, “petition on behalf of [his] African brethren,” and notes that the letter, “was received most graciously by her Majesty” (175). He opens his correspondence noting the Queen's, “benevolence and humanity,” and immediately seems to deprecate himself to some degree, trusting, “that the obscurity of [his] situation will not prevent [the Queen] from attending to the sufferings for which [he pleads]” (175). He notes that his situation is both not the norm and probably not a priority in the monarch's mind; however, because she is so gracious and compassionate, surely she will treat his pleas with every bit of attention and action they are due. The next paragraph begins with another rhetorical device. While attempting to persuade the monarch to act, he includes, yet minimizes, his own experiences. He writes, “Yet I do not solicit your royal pity for my own distress; my sufferings, although numerous, are in a measure forgotten” (175). While this may seem like feigned humility, the line actually serves a much larger purpose – to establish the author's ethos and credibility. He is able to write this letter because he knows suffering. He continues, “I supplicate your Majesty's compassion for millions of my African countryman, who groan under the lash of tyranny in the West Indies” (175). Finally, in the third line, Equiano

reveals the motivation for writing his letter. He is speaking as a man who has suffered and whose experiences are insignificant; what is important is that the benevolent Queen act on behalf of the multitudes of Africans who are enslaved or trafficked in the West Indies. Respectfully, he points out that the current system is flawed and it is those flaws that the Queen has the power to change. With that change, she will improve the lives of millions of people. The author then very briefly summarizes the current issue, noting that many, “unhappy negros there, have at length reached the British legislature, and they are now deliberating on its redress; even several persons of property in slaves in the West Indies, have petitioned parliament against its continuance, sensible that it is as impolitic as it is unjust – and what is inhuman must ever be unwise” (175). Equiano tells the Queen, then, that this is an issue that is before Parliament and one that requires her intervention. Additionally, his inclusion of a note about men of property alerts the Queen that her own wealthy subjects acknowledge the unjustness of this practice and surely, if the wealthy disagree with the practice, just as the Africans do, disagreement exists both from the bottom up and the top down and the practice must be abolished.

Equiano goes on to appeal to the Queen’s humanity, describing both his request and his rationale:

I presume, therefore, gracious Queen, to implore your interposition with your royal consort, in favor of the wretched Africans; that, by your Majesty’s benevolent influence, a period may now be put to their misery; and that they may be raised from the condition of brutes, to which they are at present degraded, to the blessings of your Majesty’s happy government; so shall your Majesty enjoy the heart-felt pleasure of procuring happiness to millions, and be rewarded in the grateful prayers of themselves, and of their posterity.

(175)

His fellow African countrymen, or the wretched Africans, are being degraded and treated as brutes, and the Queen has the influence that may sway parliament's discussion and ultimate decision. Furthermore, as Equiano mentions, hers is a happy government, which would only be improved by treating these people better. Equiano is not simply highlighting his credibility to the Queen from within the letter. Rather, his inclusion of this letter, in which he openly, in the first person voice, illustrates a problem for the Queen and suggests a resolution to the issue, bolsters his credibility with his readership. He is, in writing, in a certain position of power such that he can appeal to the Queen directly, as Olaudah Equiano, and offer her guidance. He is also able, through a letter and the act of writing, to assure her of a positive outcome, should she heed his advice and, lastly, hope that she and the Royal family be bestowed with blessings from, "the all-bountiful Creator" (175). Equiano closes the letter, telling Queen Charlotte, King George III's consort, that he is her, "Majesty's most dutiful and devoted servant to command" and signs the letters as, "Gustavas Vassa, The Oppressed Ethiopian" (176). The particular wording of this closing allows Equiano to straddle the line between two of his worlds – that of an African and that of an Englishman. He is the Queen's most devoted servant, which means, in writing at least, that he exceeds all other British subjects. He indicates that he is speaking as a British subject by using his Christian name, Gustavas Vassa, rather than his given, Igbo name, Olaudah Equiano and also by referring to himself as her servant. He immediately contradicts this, though, by referring to himself as The Oppressed Ethiopian. Again, he is, with words, reminding the queen of his authority on the subject – he is now the most devoted Englishman but he has been oppressed and can speak for and about that position as well. Presumably, he was toying with the Queen slightly, exploiting her assumed ignorance about African geography. Specifically, he calls himself Ethiopian; however, he is Igbo, which is in Nigeria, two countries separated by

approximately 3000 miles. Perhaps, though, his purpose was simply to appeal to the Queen's sympathies. If the Queen associated Equiano with Ethiopia, not really knowing the differences among African countries, she may feel an even deeper level of sympathy for the author, based on exoticism of the continent, a way of thinking that was popular in the eighteenth century. He is Igbo, not Ethiopian, but with three simple, capitalized words, he takes on an additional third identity, one that is not his to claim, but still worthy of sympathy and respect. Olaudah Equiano, in this letter, redefines his identity with words, as necessary to persuade a Queen to action.

The power of letters is demonstrated from within the novel as well, not just as a collection of external letters sent by the author to persons in positions of British power. Letters, or more specifically, the acts of writing and recording, play a lesser, yet important role throughout the *Narrative*. One such example comes in Volume II, when Equiano is aboard the *Race Horse*, captained by the Honourable John Constantine Phipps, on its route to India. Here, the author describes one detail that highlights both the importance and power of writing in his *Narrative*. He recalls that he had, "resolved to keep a journal of this singular and interesting voyage," and had to do so in a small cabin, with no other space being available to him (131). One evening, a spark fell from a candle that Equiano was moving from its holder, causing a sudden and fierce fire to erupt in the small cabin. He thought he would perish in the fire; however, crewmembers were able to put the flames out with blankets and mattresses. He was, severely reprimanded and minced by such of the officers who knew it, and strictly charged never more to go there with a light," effectively barring Equiano from writing again (131). Rather than blame the candle, Equiano was blamed for the fire and was forced to give up his space and pen.

Another example of the power of letters within the novel is Equiano's inclusion of a letter penned by Robert King. This letter, a certification of Equiano's manumission, is the only

correspondence duplicated within the text by an author other than Equiano. The manumission letter is of such magnitude that its inclusion is imperative, as this is one instance in which the author cannot assume any modicum of control. Instead, King's memo represents a time of literal and figurative freedom for Equiano, a time in which he is no longer an enslaved man, but also a point in the *Narrative* that begins much of his recording and writing process. Moreover, this letter not only frees Equiano, it also helps establish his character early on in the text, to readers of the letter, but also readers of the *Narrative*. King writes:

I the aforesaid Robert King, for and in consideration of the sum of seventy pounds current money of the said island, to me in hand paid, and to the intent that a negro man-slave, named Gustavus Vassa, shall and may become free, have manumitted, emancipated, enfranchised, and set free, and by these presents to manumit, emancipate, enfranchise, and set free, the aforesaid negro man-slave, named Gustavus Vassa, for ever, hereby giving, granting, and releasing unto him, the said Gustavus Vassa, all right, title, dominion, sovereignty, and property, which, as lord and master over the aforementioned Tustavus Vassa, I had, or now I have, or by any means whasoever I may or can hereafter possibly have over him the aforesaid negro, for ever. (106)

Equiano is referred to by his slave name, Gustavus Vassa, throughout this letter, which is, incidentally, the last time in the *Narrative* he will be labeled by another with this moniker. King's text declares Equiano a free man, a franchised and property-holding man, slave to nobody and master of himself. Equiano includes, at the end of King's text, that the memo was, "Signed, sealed, and delivered in the presence of Terrylegay, Montserrat. Registered the within manumission at full length, this eleventh day of July, 1776, in liber D," by the Registrar of Terrylegay (106). Including this detail, that the letter had been officially received and recorded,

by whom and on what date, gives even further authority to the piece, recording for readers of the *Narrative* a historical event in which the author bought his freedom from Robert King, officially rendering him thereafter a franchised, emancipated, and freed former slave. Lastly, this double recording and reporting of the letter, and the notation of its receipt by the Registrar, serves as a sort of insurance for the author, both noting the actual events for history's sake, should they be called into question, but also, as a proclamation for any readers of the *Narrative*, should they question his freedom as well.

## 4 CONCLUSION

Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, performed many roles throughout his life, from the freed slave, to the African, to the Englishman, to the savvy businessman, to the abolitionist, to the human trafficker, to the father and husband, to, ultimately, the author of one of the best-known and well-written narratives of a former slave. Scholars debate the truth of the author's stories and the authenticity of the text, with some arguing that he was never a kidnapped African child, but rather, a former slave from the Carolinas. Others assert that his *Narrative* should be believed and taken at face value, with none of the contents called into question. Ultimately, though, that question overlooks an even more important question – why did Equiano write the text at all? If we, as readers, accept that an autobiography is the story of a life, which must, by definition, be edited to fit within the confines of two covers, we must also accept that not every detail will be entirely truthful in its reporting. Details will be omitted, embellished, and minimally, reported from memory, which cannot recall every detail that actually occurred. Rather than focus on the authenticity of the story, then, scholars might turn their efforts toward what the text reveals, both about the author and the society in which he writes. Furthermore, investigating why he wrote the text at all, its purpose and consequences, is another important avenue of study. One such explanation is that he used tools previously inaccessible to him, language, writing, and letters, to negotiate his own story, as well as the story of others. He may have served as a voice for himself and other slaves, current and freed, whose stories were lost by the inability to write, possibly amalgamating the story of many into the story of one. He wrote to communicate. The text itself served as a vehicle for that communication, as it is a heterotopic space, one in which Equiano is in full control. Within the text, the author is not reduced to one identity or story; rather, he chooses his stories and is able to be all identities in a space of his own



design. The *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavas Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* is a heterotopia of compensation, created by the author, in which he is freed from his corporeal identities and selves, and is allowed to explore his experiences, beliefs, and ambitions, unencumbered by daily life. Within this space of his creation, Olaudah Equiano is neither oppressor nor oppressed; rather, he is simply a man and author who uses the tools of real-life oppressors to tell his story, the story of many, but also to enact change, to communicate with a vast many people in positions of power that he may not normally have access to, and ultimately, to shape and cultivate an identity of his own design.

## WORKS CITED

- Carretta, Vincent. *Equiano, The African: Biography of a Self-Made Man*. Athens: U of GA P, 2005. *GoogleBooks*. Web. 9 Feb. 2011.
- Casmier-Paz, Lynn. "Slave Narratives and the Rhetoric of Author Portraiture." *New Literary History* 34.1 (2003): 91-116. *ProjectMuse*. Web. 5 Sep. 2011.
- Dalton, Karen. "'The Alphabet Is an Abolitionist' Literacy and African Americans in the Emancipation Era." *The Massachusetts Review* 32.4 (1991): 545-580. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Sep. 2011.
- Davidson, Cathy. "Olaudah Equiano, Written by Himself." *NOVEL* 40.1-2 (2006). *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Feb. 2011.
- Eakin, Paul John, ed. *The Ethics of Life Writing*. New York: Cornell UP, 2004. Print.
- Earley, Samantha M. "Writing from the Center or the Margins? Olaudah Equiano's Writing Life Reassessed." *African Studies Review* 46.3 (2003): 1-16. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2011.
- Equiano, Olaudah. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2001. Print.
- Fichtelberg, Joseph. "Word between Worlds: The Economy of Equiano's Narrative." *American Literary History* 5.3 (1993): 459-480. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2011.
- Field, Emily. "'Excepting Himself': Olaudah Equiano, Native Americans, and the Civilizing Mission." *MELUS* 34.4 (2009): 15-38. *JSTOR*. Web. 1 Sep. 2011.
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. "The Trope of the Talking Book." *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. Ed. Werner Sollors. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2001. Print.

- . "Writing, 'Race,' and the Difference it Makes." *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*. Ed. David Richter. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007. 1891-1902. Print.
- Greene, Jody. "Francis Kirkman's Counterfeit Authority: Autobiography, Subjectivity, Print." *PMLA* 121.1 (2006): 17-32. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov. 2012
- Jackson, Leon. "The Talking Book and the Talking Book Historian African American Cultures of Print – The State of the Discipline." *Book History* 13 (2010): 251-308. *ProjectMuse*. Web. 1 Sep. 2011.
- Marren, Susan. "Between Slavery and Freedom: The Transgressive Self in Olaudah Equiano's Autobiography." *PMLA* 108.1 (1993): 94-105. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Aug. 2011.
- Marrouchi, Mustapha. "A Passion for Excess or Just Another Way of Telling." *College Literature* 37.2 (2010): 48-77. *JSTOR*. Web. 18 Sep. 2011.
- Moten, Fred. "Knowledge of Freedom." *The New Centennial Review* 4.2 (2004): 269-310. *MLAIB*. Web. 1 Sep. 2011.
- Rolingher, Louise. "A Metaphor for Freedom: Olaudah Equiano and Slavery in Africa." *Canadian Journal of African Studies/Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines* 38.1 (2004): 88-122. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 Sep. 2011.
- Sabino, Robin and Jennifer Hall. "The Path Not Taken: Cultural Identity in the Interesting Life of Olaudah Equiano." *MELUS* 24.1 (1999): 5-19. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Feb. 2011.
- Samuels, Wilfred. "Disguised Voice in The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African." *Black American Literature Forum* 19.2 (1985): 64-69. *JSTOR*. Web. 25 Aug. 2011.

Sollers, Werner. Afterword, Note on the Text. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself*. By Olaudah Equiano. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2001. 179-180. Print.